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# Lebanon: The Refugee Issue and the Threat of a Sectarian Confrontation

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## Abstract

*This article highlights the many dimensions of the threat that exists nowadays in Lebanon regarding the impact of the Syrian uprising turning into a civil war. To do so, I will firstly focus on the issue of Syrian refugee in Lebanon. Recalling the Syrian-Lebanese complex relationship, the article delves in the collective memory of the Palestinian issue in Lebanon that pops up again as thousands of them are fleeing Syria to seek refuge in Palestinian camps. In the second part, the article addresses the related question of Sunnis/Shiites tensions that have become a significant factor in the Syrian civil war and that have been imported into Lebanon by major political parties and entrepreneurs of violence.*

## Keywords

Syrian Refugees, Palestinians Refugees, Sectarian Tension, Hizb Allāh, al-Mustaqbal, Entrepreneurship of Violence.

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The refugee problem the Syrian uprising created has profound implications for Lebanon for, historical as well as political reasons. This impact is at least twofold: first in the daily life of Lebanese citizens and institutions and second in their representations of the “other”, the Syrian or the Palestinian refugee arriving from Syria.<sup>1</sup> With at least one million of Syrians actually residing in Lebanon, the country has reached a saturation level, as many acknowledge it (ICG, 2013). It also deepened the tension between Sunnis and Shiites. In this view, the two major Lebanese political parties of the two main Muslim sects, The Future Current (al-Mustaqbal) for the Sunnis and the God’s Party (Hizb Allāh) for the Shiites have a leading role in importing the sectarian rifts the current conflict in Syria generated.

This paper aims at analyzing the vectors of the importation of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon. In my views, a first vector of this process refers to the perception and relationship the Lebanese institutions and actors have of their Syrian and Palestinian neighbours. I will try to discuss these aspects thanks to the notion of “collective memory” inspired by the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. A second vector is incarnate by the game played by the most powerful actors of the Lebanese political scene that are at stake in the repercussion of this crisis in Lebanon: the Sunni-led group of Al-Mustaqbal (The Future Current) and the strongly militarized Shi’i-led group of Hizb Allāh. Through their actions and discourses they both bear a responsibility in the emergence of groups of entrepreneurship of violence on their fringes.

In the first part I will discuss the main issues related to the massive influx of Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011. This will lead me to recall the historic roots on which fears can be raised in several

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<sup>1</sup> See the paper of Estella Carpi in this special issue.

sectors of the population and then to understand the policy adopted by the former Mīqātī-led government until its resignation in late March 2013. The second part will deal more directly with the behaviour adopted by the two antagonistic parties al-Mustaqbal and Hizb Allāh towards the refugees since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011 as it is related to their opposite posture towards the conflict in Syria. Finally, I will argue that one of the hidden vector of a possible extension of the crisis within Lebanon is represented by the emergence of two figure of entrepreneurship of violence that are taking profit of insecurity and fear: Šaykh Asīr on the one hand and the clan of the Al-Miqdād on the other hand.

## **1. The refugee issue: from fear to State's policy**

The refugee from Syria, gathering Syrian nationals as well as Palestinians from Syria, are representing nowadays more than a million of people in Lebanon. Their massive arrival the last three years have illustrated the partial reading the Lebanese state did on this issue and the lack of clear policy toward them. It is striking also to see how problematic the relationships between Lebanese and Syrians vs. Palestinians are. In this sense, the state's policy is revealing about deep fears that dated back from the civil war (1975-1990) and that continue to shape the perception of the two national groups of foreigners that are now living as refugees in Lebanon. To clarify this issue, I will first detail the nature of these relationships in the collective memories of the main sectarian group in Lebanon. Then I will examine the State's policy towards the Syrian and Palestinian refugees to show the repercussion of these perceptions for the refugees' life in Lebanon.

### **1.1. Fear in heritage**

At the beginning of their flight, the Syrian refugees sought refuge in the Sunni villages in North Lebanon, 'Akkār and Tripoli. If they were initially welcome, the massive influx that occurred in 2012 and the increasing needs they had, transformed them into a burden for local communities first and for the State that had to deal with it. Firstly, their hosts expected them to return home soon and secondly, the financial capacity of each family where some sought with refuge was very limited. More generally, what is clearly visible is the economic slowdown that affects the export sector, increasing prices for number of basic goods, a drop of 80% in tourism revenues and a 20% fall in real estate sector investments.<sup>2</sup> In such context, the attention and care provided to refugees by Lebanese NGO's and international organisations generates resentment towards Syrian refugees in an often overblown perception put that way: "refugees are living in better conditions than we do" (ICG, 2013: 9). Such reactions are also resulting from previous perceptions of who the Syrians are and dates back to the period of war (1975-1990) and occupation of Lebanon (1990-2005). A vivid memory of humiliation, killings and arbitrary power over Lebanese citizens remains.<sup>3</sup> Even if it is clearly identified with the Asad regime, Syrians are also seen as former member of that regime approving of its methods and its policy of fear.

This brings us to the troubled and tensed relationship between Syria and Lebanon (Meier 2013a). This aspect could progressively have a heavier weight in the mind-set of Lebanese, the longer the crisis lasts. The fact is that such perception already shaped the reactions the Lebanese state took towards the Syrian refugees. In the following line, I would like to explore this mindset through the notion of "collective memory", following the seminal reflections of

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<sup>2</sup> According to several sources, the initial 8% GDP growth that occurred between 2007 and 2010 is now at a 2% level for 2012. See the paper of George Corm in this special issue.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Rougier and Picard (2000), Hanf and Salam (2002), Kassir (2006) and Meier (2007).

Maurice Halbwachs (1994). One of the key element of his theoretical thought deals with how we do remember. He explained that remembrance is a collective work: we remind things and events through and with the others. The memory can be then understood as a form of perceptions socially shared (Picaudou, 2006). To articulate such conception with a collective experience, one need to think social groups as a symbolic reality that share social relations, values and norms and thus define the meaning of its collective experience (Baussaut, 2010). But, Picaudou (2006) warns that such definition of the reality can change in time and so, the moment when things are said and thought are depending on circumstances and contexts that need to be detailed.

At present day, one can notice a political alliance between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Future Current although the definition of each of those groups is complex and changing.<sup>4</sup> Providing an explanation of such alliance is possible through the relationship between Lebanon and Syria. Since the onset, they were complex because France's mandate over the region in the 1920s divided Syria to rule it as a rebel State and take a good care of Lebanon, a separate State perceived by Arab nationalists as a colonial creation dividing a Great Arab Kingdom (Chaitani 2007). The favours granted to the Lebanese Maronite elite compared badly to the poor consideration Syrian elites were held into, contributing to increasing frustration and envy. At independence the two countries knew ups and downs based on economic exchanges as Syria constituted for Lebanon – until nowadays – the country's primary outlet and the main land access to other Arab countries for goods. Lebanon also represented a country that Syrians to express their desire for freedom and a space for Syria to "export" its manpower which in turn generated significant remittances. Since the rising of the Palestinian resistance in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab overwhelming defeat against Israel, successive Syrian regimes and the Asad one in particular tried to play the Palestinian card in Lebanon while controlling the Palestinians in Syria, Hāfidh al-Asad then sponsored and created Syrian-affiliated Palestinian militias.

This strategy led to a significant split among the Palestinian resistance in 1983, with Syria supporting the Fatah-Intifādah faction against the Arafāt-led Fatah and its allied groups after the 1982 military defeat and withdrawal of the PLO from Beirut. After Arafāt relocated its stronghold to Tripoli in the North of Lebanon, Syrian power managed to eradicate the Palestinian resistance in the city of Tripoli to regain the control over the city and definitely weaken the Palestinians in Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> In the perspective of controlling the Lebanese arena, two years later, the Syrian army dispatched its troops to brutally repress against the local Muslim Brotherhood group, the movement of *al-Tawhīd*, in the suburb of Bāb al-Tebbānah. To monitor the area and find a local ally, the Syrian regime armed and supported the Alawite militia of Eid family located in the suburb of Jabal Muhsin. The subsequent rivalry of these two suburbs of Tripoli led to shoot-outs once the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in 2005 (ICG 2010).

For the Shiites population in Lebanon, Syria is seen as an ally, as it started to rule the Shiite militia Amal since the end of the seventies and, by the end of the war, rewarded the Shiites by granting Amal's leader Nabīh Barrī the post of speaker of Parliament, a powerful position at the top of the State. With the Christians on the contrary, it is a different memory of fear that created a deep mistrust towards the Syrian regime and Syrians in general. The key moment can be identified in the year 1976 when the Phalange party send a message to Hāfidh al-Asad asking for urgent military backup against the imminent takeover of the Leftists (National Movement) allied with the Palestinian resistance. Once the Syrian army succeeded in halting

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<sup>4</sup> As it is already apparent with al-Mustaqbal (ICG 2010) and with the FSA division among seculars and Islamists. This article was written in 2014.

<sup>5</sup> See Sahlyieh (1986).

this military threat by dispatching 30,000 troops and began to meddle in Lebanon's internal turmoil, it turned against the Phalange and in 1978 started to shelling the Christian strongholds of the neighbourhood of al-Ašrafiyyah in Beirut. During the 1982 Israeli invasion, the alliance between the Lebanese Forces and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) provided the ideal combination some Christians expected would result in a more pro-western Lebanon. As high hopes faded away when Israel withdrew to the security zone, an agreement between militias under a Syrian patronage failed (1985) and pushed Syria to play the international card to impose the al-Tā'if agreements (1989) to all militias which was reluctantly accepted by the Lebanese Forces. In the new set-up of Lebanon's Second Republic, the weight of the Christians has been decreased and the last defender of Lebanon's sovereignty, General Michel 'Awn, the then head of the Lebanese Army, went into exile after a heavy battle (Picard 2002).

In the post-civil war era, the Syrian tutelage over Lebanon left a very bad memory to many Lebanese, particularly Christians who boycotted the first Parliamentary election (1992). Presented as a protective force against the rule of the militias' laws and the renewal of conflict, the Syrian military presence persisted, contrary to the al-Tā'if agreements. The system put in place was a mix of strategic and commercial interests for Syria (Salloukh, 2009). Every day extortion and regular humiliation of Syrian secret services (*mukhābarāt*) or soldiers at check-points left a popular impression of facing a rampant pillage. The fear also came from a reign of arbitrary violence that made life as surrounded by a system of unwritten laws monitored by authorities under the supervision of the Syrian "proconsul", at that time Ġāzī Kana'an.

The Syrian military withdrawal led to an expansion of violence with the assassination of a number of anti-Syrian intellectuals and politicians as if the regime in Damascus wanted to punish the Lebanese for their alliance with the US. The spread of terror with car bombs, assassinations and explosions that occurred added to the grievance against "the Syrians".<sup>6</sup> The fear continued for several years, as every targeted assassination since then was blamed on Syria by many Christian leaders and also by some Sunnis because of its supposed implications in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafīq Harīrī and security officers conducting the inquiry on his murder. This assassination was a traumatic event for the Sunni Lebanese that saw their most powerful symbol erased. It broke into pieces their political alliance with the Syrian regime perceived as responsible for this assassination. The latter has also left a heavy mark in the popular Christian mindset for whom the Syrian regime was evil. As a consequence, it then blurred the categories between occupiers and refugees the moment they flew to Lebanon in 2011. This is actually reflected in the current trend among Christian politicians – should they be 8th or 14th March affiliated<sup>7</sup> – who started accusing Syrian refugees of being a danger for Lebanon at all levels (security, politics, economic). Such reactions are telling about this long memory while those Christian politicians are supposedly allied to Al-Mustaqbal, which support the Syrian refugees against the Asad regime.

## **1.2. State's policy towards the Syrian and Palestinian refugees**

Lebanon's policy could be examined by starting at the edge of State, on borders that are currently under the spotlight due to daily shelling and attacks along its blurred limits with Syria in the Biqā' Valley. Actually, the border is a location of transition for men, weapons and

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<sup>6</sup> To the point of thousands of Syrian workers had to leave Lebanon as they feared the anger of the Lebanese. Several among those workers were randomly killed during the following years after the Syrian military withdrawal.

<sup>7</sup> The two political camps emerged in 2005 after the two mass demonstrations for the pro-Syrian gathering (Hizb Allāh, Amal, Free Patriotic Movement, Syrian Social National Party) the 8 March and for the anti-Syrian coalition (Progressive Socialist Party, Lebanese Forces, Al-Mustaqbal, the Phalangist party) the 14 March.

other supplies, slowly transforming the surrounding areas in “border zones,” as a sort of redefinition of a space thanks to its changing function. In the past, people from this region survived mainly through contraband and smuggling goods across this porous border. Today, this contraband has transformed in a new trade: helping the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and anti-regime fighters that need support, shelter and supplies.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the North of Lebanon has slowly become a new frontline for internal issues related to the security of borderlands because of the massive influx of refugees arriving from Syria in the knowledge that a part of them are members of the Free Syrian Army.<sup>9</sup> On 29 April 2011, several thousands of Syrian refugees, mainly women and children, crossed the Lebanese border in the North of Lebanon, fleeing repression in their town of Talkalakh (Balanche 2011). From its inception, this flow of refugees was a concern for the Lebanese State and officials regarding their treatment and their categorization. The first groups that arrived found shelter through kin and clan help in local communities in Wādī Khālīd and the ‘Akkār area, and also thanks to UNHCR and High Relief Commission, a Lebanese body affiliated to the Prime Minister tasked to deal with emergency situations in coordination with social affairs, education and public health ministries (ICG 2013).

With the change in government and the arrival of 8 March coalition in power, the then new Prime Minister, Najīb Mīqātī, adopted a far more ambiguous attitude toward refugees. First, he remained silent on the issue using force to close the border, trying to expel Syrian civilians seeking refuge in Lebanon, and even threatening to jail several people and deporting others. Then, he turned a blind eye to the fate of people seeking shelter, labelling them as traitors and finally stopping monitoring the arrivals of refugees, as if authorities wanted to deny the problem. During the summer 2012, the government set up a new policy of neutrality toward what is happening in Syria under the label of “dissociation policy”. Pretending to be neutral, this policy in fact adopted the point of view of the most powerful – the Syrian government – and was referring to traditional links between main political components of the Lebanese government with the Asad regime. Facing growing arrivals in 2012 as the crisis in Syria deepened, Mīqātī, still following its dissociation policy, tried to avoid any further problem in asking the ICRC to label refugees as “displaced persons” instead of “refugees” in order to avoid any gathering in camps or treatment under refugee international convention. One can also notice a sort of criminalization of the refugees<sup>10</sup> that led Mīqātī to lean on the Higher Relief Commission more than on ICRC in order to enforce the use of “displaced persons” as a legitimate terminology as Social Affairs Minister Wā’il Abū Fāoūr put in April 2012. It was clear regarding the political affiliation of the government that the meddling of the refugees with the Free Syrian Army was serving the purpose of an amalgamation of Syrian refugees as trouble makers in order to justify, in advance, any type of repression. Finally, by the end of 2012, the Lebanese government shifted from a “no problem” policy to an “urgent international call”, acknowledging that Lebanon was facing a massive influx of Syrian refugees entering and staying in the country. This shift is correlated to the international call for funding launched by UNHCR at the same time. After Prime Minister Mīqātī’s resignation, at the end of March 2013, President Sulaymān stated that Lebanon was reaching its limits to take Syrian displaced persons in, voicing, with other Christian elites that severe measures must be taken against troublemakers among Syrian refugees (Meier 2013).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with a journalist, Beirut, September 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The Lebanese Army gives the figure of a quarter of them being members of the FSA. See *L’Orient Le Jour*, 12.10.2012.

<sup>10</sup> See Culture Minister Kābī Layūn statements in *Al-Nahār*, 4.4.2012.

<sup>11</sup> As a consequence of such statements, some Syrian refugees chose to go back to Syria, cf. *Magazine*, 5.4.2013.

UNHCR statistics indicate that between August 2012 and the end of the year, the number of refugees increased from 36,000 to approx. 150,000 people. And since then, the influx has continued climb with 463,000 people by 9 May 2013 and recently reached 1,151,057 by 2 October 2014. One must note that such number is simply an estimated number of Syrian refugees actually staying in Lebanon because some refugees refuse to register, fearing for their own security as the Lebanese government is believed to be pro-Asad. According to UNHCR's last data figure early October 2014, the majority of them are now located in the Biqā' valley (36%) and in Beirut as the capital region is receiving a growing amount of them (jumping from 18% in the Spring 2013 to 27,5% in fall 2014). The North that was traditionally the hotspot for Syrian's gatherings seem to have reach its peak (24,5%) while the South of Lebanon gather a less important number (12%) with the Syrians that are also fleeing through the Šib'ā Farms area.<sup>12</sup> Such location of refugees can be explained by a mix process of refugee gathering in closed borderland (North/Biqā') first and when facing a saturation they tend to spread and tended to find new resources in town, mainly in the capital city since this last year (2013-2014). The borderlands with Syria, mainly in the Biqā', are still playing a key role for historical reasons. Trans border links, like marriages, trafficking, and markets, existed prior to the delimitation of the "Grand Liban" in 1920 and persisted further, as the separation has been seen as artificial. In addition it should be highlighted that the central power in Beirut lacked any interest for such areas. Today, the conflict in Syria incites refugees to stay close to their country but sheltered inside Lebanese borders. It is the same thought-process used by combatants of the Free Syrian Army and other anti-Asad groups, as the area allows for the setting up of training camps. With the massive presence of refugees, it is not a surprise that the North of Lebanon became a sanctuary for anti-regime activism, from where weapons are smuggled and injured combatants are tended to.

Everything is happening as if the main fears of the Miqātī government were realised; the northern part of the country has now become a stronghold for the Syrian uprising and recently turned to be a new sphere of influence of the jihadis of Al-Nusra Front and of the Islamic State<sup>13</sup>. It is not surprising to discover that, prominent politicians of the al-Mustaqbal appeared to have sent money and weapons to support the anti-regime struggle.<sup>14</sup> In this context, it is clear that settling down Syrian refugees in camps facilitated the task of the Syrian uprising for the recruitment of combatants and supporters. These "de facto camps" have emerged as the result of a constant pressure from the international organizations like the ICRC, and a "laissez-faire" policy finally adopted by Miqātī's government few months prior his resignation.<sup>15</sup> More broadly, the 8 March coalition seems to be also afraid of another collateral issue with camps provided for these refugees: their possible long-term stay in Lebanon. In effect, if the uprising in Syria is defeated most of refugees will not go back easily. On the event of a breakdown of the regime, the ensuing chaos that will prevail will also not be secure enough for most of the refugees to go back quickly (ICG 2012).

In December 2012 a new issue appeared for Lebanon as a consequence of the Syrian war: the entering of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon after the fall of Yarmūk camp in Damascus. This new influx of refugees occurred after a fierce battle during which Free Syrian Army and Islamists took over from Syrian security forces and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC).<sup>16</sup> It was a major turning point for Palestinians in Syria and it undermined their cautious neutral position in the current

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<sup>12</sup> See UNHCR website's data at: <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>>.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the clashes that erupted early August 2014 see *The Daily Star*, 3.08.14.

<sup>14</sup> For a different perspective on this issue see the paper of Lorenzo Trombetta in this special issue.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with ICRC Head of Mission in Beirut, September 2012 and April 2013.

<sup>16</sup> *Al-Akhbār*, 17.12.2012.

conflict, after the departure of the Hamas leadership from Damascus during the Spring 2012. The positioning of Hamas regarding the Syrian uprising and the internal divisions of the PFLP-GC that occurred with the fall of Yarmūk camp, are potential issues that Palestinian refugees are bringing into Lebanon. Clashes in the ‘Ayn al-Hilwah camp between Islamist partisans of the Al-Nusrah Front, which emerged in the Syrian battleground, and the pro-Baššār PFLP-GC and the al-Sā’iqah headquarters<sup>17</sup> have set an alarm among the several factions of the camp. Afraid of any renewal of Nahr al-Barīd scenario (destruction of the camp by the Lebanese Army), these local factions have dealt with that issue and recently set up a unified command structure in a trouble camp like ‘Ayn al-Hilwah in order to avoid anymore violent incidents or troubles outside camps that could result in Lebanese army intervention.<sup>18</sup>

For Lebanon, to see Palestinian refugees arriving in such number unveiled old demons linked to the civil war and the divisions among Lebanese they provoked. This fear is palpable among Christians who have bad memories of the PLO setting up in Lebanon and starting to enrol Palestinian refugees transforming in the process the refugee camps in military training areas and ruling some parts of the national territory in complete autonomy.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Christian fears are embedded in the numerous and fierce battles they had with the Palestinian *fidā’iyyin* – who had originally arrived as refugees in 1948 and who were allied to the predominantly Muslim rival Lebanese groups gathered in the National Movement. The loss of power for the Christians of Lebanon by the end of the civil war when Damascus took the lead over the country have often been described as the consequence of the Palestinian presence in Lebanon (al-Khazen, 2001). Nowadays, the main tensions can arise less from “terrorist cells” hidden in the camps but more from the living conditions the “Syrian” Palestinian refugees are facing, as they gather in overcrowded spaces in Saydā and Tyre’s camps. In the meantime, a recent UNRWA’s inquiry showed first that some of them chose to return to Syria as their living conditions in Lebanon really worsened and as a consequence their number slightly decreased.<sup>20</sup> And second, a process of emigration is now taking place and echoes the closing of the Lebanese border for Palestinians from Syria since May 2014 (Meier, 2014).

## 2. The threat of a sectarian confrontation Sunnis–Shiites

The “Arab Spring”, wrote Hicham Ben Abdallah El-Alaoui in *Le Monde diplomatique*, is a process that is experiencing a larger strife between Sunnis and Shiites across several countries of the Middle East. And a Shiite axis (Iran, Syria, and Hizb Allāh) seems to have provoked an objective alliance between USA, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey in order to limit its scope of influence (El-Alaoui 2013). Although one may not want to agree with this cultural reading, it is fact that Lebanon looks as if it embodies all the contradictions of the region and also the tensions among enemies.<sup>21</sup> The second year of the Syrian uprising created more side effects in Lebanon as the initial hope of a quick resolution of the crisis faded away. Several clashes in Tripoli in 2012 and a slow erosion of power of the two parties - al-Mustaqbal and

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<sup>17</sup> See *Al-Akhbār* english, 4.2.2013.

<sup>18</sup> The memory of the destruction of Nahr el-Bared camp near Tripoli in 2007 – when a jihadi-led group Fatah al-Islam took position in the camp after killing dozens of Lebanese soldiers and the Lebanese Army besieged and shelled the camp during three month – is still working as a collective nightmare. Interview with a leading figure of the Democratic Front for Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), April 2013.

<sup>19</sup> That’s one of the heavy memory of the “Fathaland” that goes along with the common fear often heard about the “extra-judicial” spaces that Palestinian camps would be.

<sup>20</sup> From the initial figure of 70,000 refugees at least, UNRWA last door-to-door inquiry showed a figure of 42,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria. See *Monthly Briefing*, Issue 37, 31 July 2014

<sup>21</sup> For a reading of the Sunnis/Shia confrontation in Lebanon and in the regional context see Di Peri in this special issue.



Hizb Allāh - have driven the country on a dangerous path of private violence (with the al-Miqdād episode last summer and the Šaykh Asīr phenomenon in Saydā as detailed below) within the wider turmoil. These two political movements saw their interests in a sectarian interpretation of the Syrian conflict between the Alawite power and the opposed Sunni-led armed groups. They have imported it as a general framework shaping the older Sunnis-Shiites tension that found its basement in the political opposition 8/14 March. Actors between these two political blocks are using this sectarian opposition to reinforce their discourse and position at the risk of provoking escalations that could get out of control.

## 2.1. Dangerous Games: al-Mustaqbal and Hizb Allāh's Strategies

The sectarian dimension that has arisen is the by-product of a legacy of previous tensions and frustrations and a dangerous strategy followed by the two political parties that have tried to gather the Sunnis in al-Mustaqbal – the Harīrī-led party, and the Shiites in Hizb Allāh – a clearly religious oriented party. Nevertheless, both of them are claiming a nationalist orientation and both are providing with a “national” vision for Lebanon. Among some Sunnis affiliated with al-Mustaqbal, a legacy of powerlessness have crystallized in a belief of their political marginalization that started with the assassination of former Prime minister Rafīq Ḥarīrī followed by the return of a Syrian imperium on Lebanon through Hizb Allāh's.<sup>22</sup> This was illustrated by weaponry demonstrations during the 2006 July war against Israel and, even more so, the takeover of West Beirut in May 2008 when Hizb Allāh launched a “coup” over the capital in order to obtain militarily a political decision that the party of God was not able to win by other means. This explanation of what happened is, of course, partial but translates a major fear against a Shiite axis and a feeling of disregard for Sunnis' pride and interests. From this point-of-view, there has been a reading of the “Sunni struggle” against Hizb Allāh as a mirror of the struggle of the Syrian uprising against the regime of Baššār al-Asad.

On the other side, Hizb Allāh's sectarian perception of the refugee issue is related to a security dilemma. Facing a massive influx of Syrians, most of them from Sunni confession, the policy of Hizb Allāh was to see the problem as both humanitarian (and the party provided aid) and political, when humanitarian intervention is used to boost support for insurgents. More revealing, several cadres of God's Party tended to reveal a narrow mind-set, fearing the formation of an internal enemy and so nurturing sectarian tensions (ICG, 2013). In the meantime, they didn't seem to understand that Hizb Allāh's involvement in Syria with Asad regime rendered almost impossible a non-reaction from Syrian refugees who are sympathetic to the insurgents. But the main problem is purely political as statements and threat of FSA towards Hizb Allāh showed (although in return Hizb Allāh tends to undermine insurgents in labelling them as *takfīrīs*). In other words, the Syrian uprising is bolstering this sectarian perception of a broader struggle across the Middle East where Sunnis confronts Shiites providing confidence to Sunni Islamists to settle old scores.

More concretely, as noted by the ICG (2012), the conflict in Syria allowed all Islamist groups to bolster their standing and reconnect with a sectarian selective memory. This means a systematic sectarian reading of every event that affects any Sunni militants as in May 2012 when riots started after a Lebanese Salafi anti-Syrian was arrested for its implication in a *Jihādi* “terrorist groups.”<sup>23</sup> It is the same feeling that spread across the community when two Sunnis clerics were killed at a military check-point in North Lebanon and when a prominent

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<sup>22</sup> And this representation of Hizb Allāh as the main enemy of the Sunnis became stronger after the indictment of four members of the God's party by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in June 2011.

<sup>23</sup> See Mawlawi's arrest in Tripoli on [www.naharnet.com](http://www.naharnet.com) 12.5.2012.

Sunni figure within the Lebanese security apparatus, Wissām Al-Hasan, was assassinated in al-Ašrafiyyah in October 2012. The rage in the streets of Beirut the following day was the result of sectarian mobilization. It also showed the dangerous game al-Mustaqbal leaders have been playing and the price they paid that day in being unable to mobilize peacefully. In this context, the poor number of people al-Mustaqbal succeeded to mobilize for a demonstration against Mīqātī just after Wissām al-Hasan's assassination is revealing of a lack of political vision. Both examples showed an erosion of the legitimacy of political leaders and among al-Mustaqbal the continuation of a process of implosion (ICG, 2010a), aggravated by the flight of the party's leading figure, Sa'ad Harīrī, to Paris for security reasons for over a year.

In December 2012, the support of one MP of al-Mustaqbal rose sectarianism as accusation and counter-accusation spreaded in the newspapers. Similarly, Hizb Allāh was accused in October 2012 to have send combatants in Syria to take side with the Syrian regime against the Free Syrian Army.<sup>24</sup> During the Spring 2013, anti-regime sources said the party of God has dispatch several combatants in the surroundings of the village of Qusayr in order to take this FSA stronghold to secure a road between ẓimẓ and the Alawite region under Baššār's Army and the Hizb Allāh-led Biqā'-Hirmil region.<sup>25</sup> This involvement of Hizb Allāh with the Asad regime was then confirmed by Hasan Nasrallāh himself in his 25 May 2013 speech and the battle of Qusayr that ensued brought Asad regime a major victory. Both examples show how the tension among sects can be used to justify action, mobilize a group, and define what is right and wrong. They both illustrated the danger for Lebanese political actors to take side in the Syrian crisis at the risk of dragging Lebanon into the Syrian conflict or importing its main dynamics in Lebanon.

For its part, Hizb Allāh's strategy regarding the current crisis in Syria relies on a strategic partnership with the Syrian leadership since the experience of 2006 July war when Damascus helped and supported the party of God. More significantly, Syria is historically the strategic depth for Hizb Allāh, the country through which its role as the Resistance against the Israeli threat has been entrenched in the post-civil war era. In such condition of existence, Hizb Allāh never felt that another sustainable alternative to its support of the Syrian regime would have existed. In the meantime, its perception of the Syrian conflict is by large disconnected with the Syrian daily reality, as Hizb Allāh never fostered a deep and strong relationships with any segment of the Syrian society, and always dealt with the regime on political and strategic matters (ICG, 2012). In Lebanon, Hizb Allāh sees itself as a powerful group with high self-confidence regarding its leadership on the political stage and its role in maintaining the Mīqātī government. This has some effects in the prolonged Syrian crisis environment: it seems to reinforce the attraction the party can have towards its constituencies. In effect, as mentioned by ICG (2013) one side effect of the tensed situation with car bombed in the Hizb Allāh stronghold in Beirut is the reinforcement of the sectarian belonging as the Shiites see themselves as vulnerable in the midst of the current Sunni-led turmoil of the Syrian uprising.

Since the onset of the turmoil in Syria, Hizb Allāh kept its alliance with the Syrian regime. On the internal political stage, its alliances with Michel 'Awn's Free Patriotic Movement and Nabīh Barrī's Amal movement set the core system of 8 March coalition around the main interest of preserving Lebanon's stability. Various reasons why Hizb Allāh wants to keep this stability can be listed. First, it maintains a military *status quo* with Israel. Second, this stability avoids major clash between Sunnis and Shiites<sup>26</sup>. Third, the stability is provided

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<sup>24</sup> In its last inquiry, ICG (2012: 19) stated that, at the beginning of December 2012, Hizb Allāh had a minor involvement in the Syrian conflict.

<sup>25</sup> See *L'Orient Le Jour*, 24.4.2013.

<sup>26</sup> The party of God used the American ideological movie "The Innocence of Muslims" to appear as a gathering figure crossing the sectarian differences. See *al-Safir*, 18.09.2012.

through the containment of the 14 March opponents, continuing to refuse any erection of camps for the Syrian refugees and in the meantime supporting them with help and care and dissociating the political dimension of the crisis from its humanitarian aspects.<sup>27</sup> Fourth, Hizb Allāh did make some concessions to support Mīqātī's "dissociation policy," and after its resignation, support the election of a moderate Sunni leader, Tammām Salām, in order to release the political tension. In the meantime, the nine-month period that was necessary to form the new government is partly due to Hizb Allāh intransigence and is telling about the dangerous game the party is ready to play regarding the internal stability for the profit of keeping its influence on the main Lebanese political orientations.

## **2.2. The Raising of Entrepreneurship of Violence**

A major concern that slowly appeared during 2012 is the lack of capacity of control that main political actors seem to have on their respective constituencies. Several salient problems raised that question during the years 2012 and 2013 and should warn any observer of the region about the rising power of entrepreneurship of violence. The eroding legitimacy of al-Mustaqbal is due a lack leadership that became apparent after the killing of Wissām Al-Hasan and due to the conflicting interests within the party on a range issues - the role of Islam in politics, the alliance with the US, and the attitude toward the Shiites in Lebanon. In the case of Hizb Allāh, the Al-Miqdād coup during the summer 2012 when they kidnapping Syrians refugees and workers was a sign among other of the erosion of its influence. Other unfolded trafficking, corruption, and privileges of some relatives of Hizb Allāh's leaders have crippled the image of strong morality of the party of God and reduce its influence on people's lives.

The Al-Miqdād militiamen were part of a powerful Shi'i clan (of several thousands of people spread all around the country) originating from the Biqā' Valley and known for the connections in Beirut southern suburb where they are strong property developers since the 1950s. The kidnapping they organized of almost 50 Syrian refugees supposedly linked to the Free Syrian Army and one Turk sheds a crude light on the political scene during the summer 2012. Their justification for such a mass kidnapping was simple: one of their relatives had just been captured in Syria, presumably by the FSA. In effect, none among the State or political actors seemed to be able either to free the Al-Miqdād relative in Syria or dismantle the "armed branch" of the Al-Miqdād clan in order to free the kidnapped people.<sup>28</sup> During this crisis, Hizb Allāh kept a strange silence although all the kidnappings and Al-Miqdād's press conferences took place in Beirut's southern suburb, one of the strongholds of the party. At first sight "manipulation" was seen as congruent hypothesis as the party would benefit from pressure on anti-Syrian regime actors in Lebanon and also on members of the FSA entering as refugees in Lebanon. And of course, Hizb Allāh was supposed to be the key actor to unlock that situation and so it appeared as an influent mediator in such crisis instead of being identified as the taking side for the Syrian regime.

In fact, the way things turn later on that summer and the fact that, instead of intervening with their own people, Hizb Allāh let the Internal Security Forces (ISF) troops take over the area and capture the Al-Miqdād kidnappers, suggests another explanation: a weakness or incapacity to intervene to solve the problem. The explanation refers less to a lack of force but probably more to a lack of legitimacy, raising the question of the disturbance capacity that a Shiite clan can have. In fact Hizb Allāh would avoid any direct confrontation as this 10,000 clan's members have a social and political weight that no-one can ignore (Harb and Deeb 2012). What happened can be analysed as a form of "autonomization" among the

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<sup>27</sup> See *Daily Star*, 1.10.2012.

<sup>28</sup> See *Le Monde*, 16.08.12.

Shiites towards the leadership of Hizb Allāh within its own stronghold. As the Al-Miqdād deployed in arms, it can be seen as a new step in the dereliction of security control over Lebanese territory—as it is also the case elsewhere in some areas of the country like in the Biqā' Valley. There, private vengeance groups acting like outlaws and the rise of a criminal market of hostages led to a process of disenfranchisement of the sovereignty of the State over Lebanon's territory.

The ISF intervention against the Al-Miqdād clan put a temporary end to this anarchy in the southern suburb. However the ripples and long standing effects in the mind of people regarding the way things can be done remain; it seems now possible for other groups, clans, and families to seek their own justice if parties, leaders and the State are not powerful enough to do the job. This scenario could be read as following the “de-sectorization” process illustrated by the French sociologist Michel Dobry (1986) who tended to describe a stage of growing insecurity, called “political fluidity” (*fluidité politique*) where the disconnection among sectors of the society reduce the predictability of every day security. In Lebanon, the lack of power of the State is not really new but what seems to have masked it was the power of post-militia parties during the post-civil war era. The erosion of their capacity of control tends to reveal a far more chaotic security scene and as a consequence, a fragmentation of the national territory well understood by the Lebanese Army as they divided the country in regions of different level of importance to tighten their control.<sup>29</sup>

On the side of the 14 March coalition, the landscape seems more worrying. The phenomenon of militiamen popping in the cities and provoking significant clashes like the ones in Tripoli seems to have expanded to Saydā with the protest movement initiated by Šaykh Asīr and its possible militarization. One can explain the appearance of Asīr protest movement at the junction of a pauperization process of the city (and the lack of investments) and of an indirect effect of Hizb Allāh's weapons creating a deep frustration based on a feeling of powerlessness that has spread among the Sunni community.<sup>30</sup> This constitutes a fertile ground for mobilization and for the acquisition of weaponry in order to gain a power of deterrence more than a capacity to confront Hizb Allāh (ICG, 2012). On a regular basis since last summer 2012, Šaykh Asīr tried to import this way of reading the reality in Beirut but failed to mobilize Sunnis, although he threatened to set up a militia after a fight with Hizb Allāh's militants that led to the death of several partisans of the Šaykh.<sup>31</sup> More recently, he made new attempts in the North of Lebanon<sup>32</sup> when dead bodies of Lebanese fighters killed by the Syrian regime were repatriated, but it didn't seem to have been a successful, as the local scene sees the presence of several actors that monopolize the political scene. After a process of militarization including public call for military involvement of Sunnis volunteers for the jihad in Syria against the Asad regime, Šaykh Asīr did a military coup in controlling Said for few hours with its militiamen by mid-June 2013. This finally ended with a major clash with the Lebanese army that besieged the Šaykh and his partisans in the Mosque of Abra, near Saydā. Three days of combats put an end to its movement although the Šaykh himself vanished into thin air during the fight<sup>33</sup>.

In Tripoli, constant eruptions of violence (an average of four per year since 2005 generating dozens of deaths each time) have dragged the capital of North Lebanon into a security vacuum. In spite of such a situation and regular “security plans” set up by the Interior

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<sup>29</sup> This strategy puts Mont Lebanon/Beirut area as the heart of the national safety device. Interview with an anonymous informant, Beirut, June 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Ahmad Baydūn, Beirut, December 2012.

<sup>31</sup> See *L'Orient Le Jour*, 17.11.2012.

<sup>32</sup> See *Daily Star*, 16.12.2012.

<sup>33</sup> See *L'Orient le Jour*, 23.06.2013.

Security Forces (ISF) the entrepreneurialships of violence have gain a form of autonomy that finally alarmed the 14 March coalition and al-Mustaqbal in particular, considering the fact those militiamen are defined as close to 14 March. With small groups of anti-Syrian regime Salafis, the suburb of Bāb al-Tabbānah seems to have developed small companies that are selling their militia power to other actors, like the Gulf monarchies, that sponsored other similar actors in Syria or Iraq<sup>34</sup>. Broader interests seem then to lay behind the fight between Bāb al-Tabbānah and its counterpart the Alawite Jabal Muhsan suburb and deepen the rift among the two sects that both claim to be besieged by the other group against whom only force can be the way to affirm their own identity.<sup>35</sup> One of the most worrying aspects of this privatization of war is the emergence of former professional of the Army who decided to recruit combatants like former Col. Hammūd, to set up a Sunni militia. In the case of Hammūd's militia, as reported by *al-Akbār* newspaper, he trained and sent fighters on several frontlines, in Tripoli as well as in Syria and then succeeded in relocating its activity with rank and files in the Beirut Sunni stronghold of al-Tarīq al-Jadīdah without being arrested or accused.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

It seems undoubted that the refugee issue will have consequences on the current internal situation in Lebanon. As we have seen in this article, the massive presence of Syrian refugees together with the arrival of thousands of Palestinian refugees provoke fear, tensions and are stirring off a controversy about the attitude the Lebanese State should adopt facing the crisis in Syria. It is also clear that the Hizb Allāh's statements made late May 2013 confirming its military involvement with the Asad regime have generated major security issues with several car bombs exploding in the Beirut southern suburb and other explosions targeting the Shi'i community elsewhere in the country, all claimed by Sunnis jihadists probably linked to Syrian groups close to al-Qaida. The escalation of clashes in the capital of the North, Tripoli, the moment al-Qusayr just fell and the violence of the round of the battle between the two rival suburbs that followed gave a dark picture of a possible spill-over generated by the confrontation in Syria and its importation in Lebanon thanks to al-Mustaqbal and Hizb Allāh. The new Prime Minister Tammām Salām doesn't seem able to change anything towards these powerful actors. More problematic is the possibility that not even traditional sectarian leaders would be in a position to stop provocations and riots to erupt from time to time. This can be explained through the massive presence of new Syrian with some foreign actors, not clearly identified, probably linked to the Islamist complex web.<sup>37</sup> If some analysts predict the continuation of such slow motion unrest with occasional irruption of violence,<sup>38</sup> others, outside Lebanon, underline the strong effects that a change in Syria could produce in Lebanon.<sup>39</sup> But one hypothesis has to be explored further: the continuation of a *status quo* in Syria and in Lebanon as well. These concluding remarks would lay on this highly probabilistic scenario.

As seen in this article, there are several vectors of importation of the Syrian crisis and war spill over in Lebanon. Apart the direct implication of Syrian officers in destabilizing Lebanon – a scenario that even Hizb Allāh wouldn't approve of because Lebanon's stability is

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<sup>34</sup> *Al-Akbār*, 24.10.12.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>37</sup> During the summer 2014, several Jihadists from different countries have been arrested in Beirut.

<sup>38</sup> As stated by Aḥmād Beydūn, interviewed in Beirut, December 2012.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance Berthelot (2012).

actually a pillar of its strategy – both 8/14 March political forces are using the Syrian turmoil for their own purposes in order to mobilize or affirm a strong position. Another danger seems that in using categories and dichotomies that result from the battlefield such as Sunnis vs. Shi'ites, terrorists vs. government, people vs. oppressors the type of mobilization created among Lebanese could spread within the society and becoming a new matrix of perception of the other and defined it as an enemy.<sup>40</sup> At some point, this could ease the task of entrepreneurs of violence to enrol new militants with radical messages and so simplify the use of violence. Unfortunately, the political divisions in Lebanon are sending messages of discord, even within the two antagonistic coalitions, revealing a fragmentation process where every little event could degenerate in less controllable confrontations.

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<sup>40</sup> On this point see also Di Peri and Trombetta in this special issue.

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